

Understanding Genocide in the Old Testament

The cover of the book *Show Them No Mercy: 4 Views on God and Canaanite Genocide* (edited by Stanley Gundry, published by Zondervan) poses the question this way:

Christians are often shocked to read that Yahweh, the God of the Israelites, commanded the total destruction---all men, women, and children---of the ethnic group known as the Canaanites. This seems to contradict Jesus' command in the New Testament to love your enemies and do good to all people. How can Yahweh be the same God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? What does genocide in the Bible have to do with the politics of the 21st century?

Deuteronomy 7:1-11

1 When Yahweh your God brings you into the country that you are entering to take possession of, and puts down many nations before you (Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations bigger and stronger than you), 2 and Yahweh your God gives them up before you and you strike them down, you will devote them totally. You will not seal a covenant with them. You will not show grace to them. 3 You will not intermarry with them. You will not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, because they will turn your sons from following me and they will serve other gods. Then the anger of Yahweh your God will flare up against you and he will quickly destroy you. 5 Rather, do this to them. Demolish their altars. Break up their pillars. Cut down their columns. Burn their statues with fire. 6 Because you are a people holy to Yahweh your God. It was you that Yahweh your God chose to become a special people for him from all the peoples on the face of the ground. 7 It was not because of your being bigger than all the peoples that Yahweh got attached to you and chose you, because you were smaller than all the peoples. 8 Because of Yahweh's giving himself to you and because of his keeping the promise he made to your ancestors, he brought you out with a strong hand, redeemed you from the household of serfs, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. So you are to acknowledge that Yahweh your God – he is God, the God who is steadfast, keeping covenant and commitment to people who give themselves to him and keep his commands, to a thousand generations, 10 but who repays people who oppose him to his face by destruction. He is not slow with the person who opposes him to his face; he repays him. 11 So you are to take care to observe the command (the rules and the decisions) that I am requiring of you today.

Some background to the question

1. The word for “total destruction” is *herem* (the related verb is *haram*), which means giving something over to God. “Devote” is nearer the meaning of the verb. It is used in Leviticus 27 in connection with devoting a field to God.

2. Annihilating other peoples was not Israel's regular approach to them. The question arises only in the period associated with Moses and Joshua (and then in the time of Saul in connection with the Amalekites, as a piece of unfinished business).
3. There's no basis in Scripture for colonizers in (say) southern Africa or the Americas taking Deuteronomy and Joshua as authorization or precedent for their action.
4. The Canaanites were not Israel's enemies. There was no animosity between the two peoples.
5. Yahweh didn't invent the idea of annihilating people. It was Israel's idea, which God accepted (see Numbers 21:1-3).
6. The action the Old Testament refers to is not genocide, in the sense that it's not ultimately ethnically-based. Joshua and company accept Rahab and her Canaanite family, who acknowledge Yahweh. They destroy Achan and his Israelite family, who fail to acknowledge Yahweh.
7. The action is not genocide, in the sense that it never happened. Yahweh commanded genocide but the Israelites did not do it. There's little direct critique of the Israelites for failing to do so.
8. Jesus doesn't see a tension between loving people and commanding people to love their enemies on one hand, and sending people to hell or declining to forgive them if they decline to forgive others on the other.

Some approaches to the question

1. Moses and Joshua were mistaken in their understanding of God. They thought God told them to get Israel to annihilate the Canaanites, but they were wrong. Jesus' enthusiasm for the Torah makes it unlikely that he thought there was anything wrong with them, and he would certainly have got into trouble if he talked that way, because all Jews accepted the Torah. Likewise other parts of the New Testament think Joshua was a great guy (Acts 7; Hebrews 11).
2. God changed his way of acting. In the Old Testament, he believed in annihilating enemies; later he gave it up. Or in the Old Testament, he believed in using his people in this way, but later he gave it up. Warfare becomes "spiritual" rather than literal.
3. The instructions in Deuteronomy were not meant to be taken literally. They are like Jesus saying "If your right eye causes you to stumble, cut it out." The Old Testament later uses the verb *haram* of God's action in relation to Israel, but it did not indicate actual total destruction.
4. The stories of annihilation were not meant to be taken literally. For instance, the most concentrated collection of references to *herem* come in Joshua in connection with the destruction of Jericho and Ai, but actually neither Jericho nor Ai were inhabited in Joshua's day. These are stories that dramatize the fact that it was God who gave the country to Israel. You might call them historical parables, like Genesis 1-3 and some of Jesus' parables – they are about real events (God really created the world and people, God really gave Israel the country) but they express that in the form of a parable.
5. The basis for annihilating the Canaanites (and the Amalekites) was the wrong they had done, for instance the practice of human sacrifice, not (for instance) that they were in Yahweh's way or in Israel's way. See especially Genesis 15:16

(Amorites is here and elsewhere another word for Canaanites). Admittedly they might have got away with it if they hadn't been in the wrong place at the wrong time.

6. The stories about annihilation are "if only" stories. If only Israel had annihilated the Canaanites, they wouldn't have got into such a mess by imitating their ways.
7. The stories are part of the "once-for-all" or "one-time" nature of the beginnings of Israel and the beginnings of the church. God did some things then that he didn't intend to repeat. Compare Acts 5.

Wherein lies the difference between Yahweh and Jesus, or between God's acting in the Old Testament and in the New?

1. It's not that Yahweh loves only Israel. Yahweh loves all peoples and is committed to seeing them come to acknowledge him.
2. It's not that Yahweh doesn't expect Israelites to love their enemies. In Leviticus 19 the context of the command to love your neighbor shows that its concern lies with the neighbor who is your enemy. There was nothing very novel about Jesus saying you should love your enemies (there were pacifists in Jesus' day), though no doubt it would seem a scandalous idea to some people as it does to some people today.
3. It's not that Jesus rejects the idea of judgment. It is he who introduces the idea of hell into the Bible (Yahweh never talks about people going to hell).
4. It's not that Yahweh's ethics are generally lower than Jesus' ethics. Yahweh is the one who limits "slavery" to a six-year bond service after which people are free. The New Testament accepts lifelong chattel slavery.
5. Thus it's not that Jesus states only an ideal but that Yahweh starts where people are. Both the Old and New Testaments do both.
6. Likewise in both Testaments there is a difference between how we act on our own behalf and/or in personal relationships (not taking redress from people who do wrong) and how we act on other people's behalf and/or in political relationships.
7. In Deuteronomy, the Israelites were to be the means of God acting in judgment on the Canaanites. So Israel is to "give them over" to God. This is not so in the New Testament. But neither is it so throughout the Old Testament. The Old Testament talks much of God's coming judgment on the nations but never sees Israel as the means of executing it.
8. A key difference is that the people of God is a political entity in the Old Testament but not in the New. God's attempt to redeem the world by means of a political entity didn't work so God tried a different way.

Why does Yahweh's willingness to talk about genocide bother us? What are the implications for us?

1. We speak of "the problem of war in the Old Testament" but neither the Old nor the New Testament sees a problem there, though they recognize that was not there at the beginning and will not be there at the end. War became a problem in the modern Western world as a result of the Enlightenment, which popularized the idea that war could be eliminated. The Bible expects war to be a continuing reality.
2. Our concern about genocide is part of our ambivalence about war. We are the world's biggest war-makers yet we are uneasy about the fact.
3. The Canaanites were the regional power in Israel's world. In our world, we are the Canaanites. It is the powers that Yahweh judges. The Old Testament's talk about genocide is a threat to us.
4. We do nothing much about genocide in our own world.